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ABSTRACT

The methodological issues associated with life-history research are explored from the perspectives of researcher and teacher of qualitative research methods, and from the perspective of a participant in a life-history study. The author illustrates with her own experiences how different research can look from both sides of the microphone and how important reflexivity (self-reflexive ideas) is in research practice. She engaged in a life-history study of her practice as a teacher educator, both to complement her own self-study agenda and to explore what it means to be researched. Another researcher, studying the conduct of life-history research, engaged the author as subject. A self-reflexive stance means that the researcher himself or herself defines an inquiry, makes assumptions explicit, and raises awareness about how participants might feel in order to be responsive to them throughout the research. The experiential understanding gained adds a critical dimension to the author's practice of qualitative research. (Contains 40 references.) (SLD)

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DOING LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH–
IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

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DOING LIFE HISTORY RESEARCH-

IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE

Do you still keep in touch with your mother?

My mother passed away a couple of weeks ago. We were close friends. . . .

What about your brother?

He died a few years ago under mysterious circumstances. . . .

So all you have left is your sister?

She passed away when she was eight. I have no family.

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I'd like to know what type of child you were.

Well, I was the youngest in the family. I have two siblings, both brothers, older–one six years older and one eight. I am the baby of the family.

What did that mean to you?

It meant a lot of things. . . .

What type of things did you do as a family?

Our family was kind of dysfunctional you might say. . . .

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These excerpts are typical of the kind of exchanges that take place in life history interviews. The questions are personal, intrusive, and may evoke memories of difficult experiences and events in a participant's life. As life history researchers we ask these kinds of questions all the time, but not because we want

to invade privacy or evoke pain (or pleasure). Usually, such questions are intended to elicit information that will assist in developing a contextualized understanding of human phenomena and experience, that is, understanding of phenomena influenced by a complex array of historical, political, societal, institutional, and personal circumstances. In a broad sense, life history research aims to understand life as lived in the present and as influenced by personal, institutional, and social histories.

Life history approaches have a long and reputable history in the fields of psychology (Allport, 1942; Dollard, 1935; White, 1963), sociology (Bertaux, 1981; Denzin, 1989; Plummer, 1983), and anthropology (Kluckhohn, 1945; Langness, 1965; Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). More recently, life history approaches have been adopted by educational researchers to study teachers' lives and careers, teaching, schooling, and curriculum (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Beynon, 1985; Casey, 1993; Goodson, 1981, 1988, 1991, 1992; Goodson & Cole, 1994; Knowles, 1992, 1993; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Measor & Sykes, 1992; Smith, Dwyer, Prunty, & Kleine, 1988; Woods, 1987). For example, the first of the above introductory excerpts is from a conversation I had in a life history study of beginning community college teachers (see, Goodson & Cole, 1994). The questions asked (and the responses they elicited) helped us uncover threads of the interwoven fabric of the teachers' professional and personal lives; similarly with the second example which came from a life history study of teacher educators (Cole, in progress). To the extent that both studies aim to understand life history influences on professional practice, they are similar. They differ, however, in one important respect. In the first, I was the researcher; in the second, one of the researched. In the first, I directed the conversation; in the second, a researcher guided my responses.

In this paper, I explore methodological issues associated with life history research. I write from the perspective of researcher and teacher of qualitative research methods (including life history, narrative, heuristic, and other forms of personal and interpretive inquiry), and from the perspective of a participant in a life history study. In so doing, I illustrate, first, how distinctively different research can look from either side of the microphone and, second, the importance of reflexivity in research practice. Understanding in the experiential sense–from the perspective of a research participant–what it means to be engaged in "researching the personal" is critical for the development of sensitive and responsive researchers. According to Hunt (1987), " Being a participant in your own research is . . . . the Golden Rule in developing research methods" (p. 118).

Background

I broadly characterize myself professionally as a teacher educator with particular interests or specializations in teacher development and qualitative research methods. Among other things, I teach Master's and Doctoral degree courses in qualitative research methods. Often, doctoral students seek my participation on their theses committees as "the methodology person." I have published articles on research methods in educational research (Cole, 1989, 1991; Cole & Knowles, 1993). As a research practitioner I have designed and conducted numerous studies using a variety of qualitative approaches. From these different vantage points I "know" qualitative research. Certain values and beliefs about research guide my thinking and practice and I make them explicit in my teaching, writing, and researching. For example, in a recent article, "Teacher Development Partnership Research: A Focus on Methods and Issues" (Cole & Knowles, 1993), I consider the intrusive nature of research into teachers' lives, the need for "equitable, mutually educative, and authentically collaborative

research" (p. 491), and the importance of attending to ethical and political issues in researching the personal.

Recently, however, I have come to know life history research in another way. I was engaged as a participant in a life history study of my practice as a teacher educator (as part of an ongoing self-study research program and as part of a larger study of teacher educators I am co-conducting). I did this partly to complement my ongoing self-study agenda but mainly to explore the question, "What does it mean to be the researched?" I worked with another researcher, Madeleine, whose agenda was to learn more about conducting life history research[1]. She engaged me in a series of life history interviews, or conversations, and observed me teaching and working with graduate students in different contexts. Field notes from those observations formed the basis for more focused conversations about my practice.

A substantial part of each conversation was devoted to joint reflection on the research process. We talked about how we experienced our respective roles of "the researcher" and "the researched," and discussed a whole range of technical, procedural, conceptual, political, ethical, and relational issues from our respective positions. Elsewhere we reflect jointly on our research experience (Cole & Trapedo-Dworsky, in preparation). Here, I look at my own experience of

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[1] Madeleine is a doctoral candidate in the final stages of completing her thesis in which, following Moustakas (1990), she takes a heuristic approach to inquiry. Since qualitative research methods is one of her areas of specialization Madeleine is already a skilled qualitative researcher; however, she wished to learn more about life history research in particular. She approached me with a request that we work together in a supervisor-student relationship so that I might facilitate her understanding about life history research. Initially intrigued by the proposition but uncomfortable with the hierarchical and seemingly one-sided nature of her proposal, we agreed to talk further. After some thought and a further conversation we negotiated and agreed upon a mutually beneficial arrangement: she would learn about doing life history research by being a life history researcher and I would enhance my own understanding about life history research by being a participant. Together we would engage in ongoing reflection on and analysis of the research process and our respective roles in relation.

being the researched, especially as it relates to my being a researcher, writer, and teacher of qualitative research methods.

To organize my interpretation and representation I engage in a reflexive analysis using my theoretical understandings of life history research–as expressed in my teaching and writing–as a reflective lens for the knowledge derived from my experience of being a participant in a life history study. Thus, I engage, both here on paper and in my mind, in a kind of dialogue with different forms of my knowing of life history research. As some have characterized the role of the qualitative researcher as "the instrument," I am doubly so in this context. I use the question, "What does it mean to be the researched?" as a probe to examine some of the theoretical and practical statements and characterizations I have made about life history research. In this analysis I draw only on my own articulations about life history research with full acknowledgment that my thinking and knowing about life history methods and issues are influenced by others such as Bertaux (1981), Denzin (1989), Plummer (1983), Goodson (1981, 1988, 1991, 1992), Knowles (1992, 1993), Measor and Sykes (1992), and Middleton (1992). I do not use their words in my reflexive dialogue because I cannot know the underlying dimensions of their words in the way that I know my own.

In Theory and In Practice

As I looked back at my experience of being the researched, and at my documented reflections on that experience, I was made aware that most of my responses were imbued with affect of strong intensity. Not surprisingly, as a research participant–the researched–I was more aware of how I felt about various elements of the research process than about "methodological correctness." Consequently, in organizing this analysis, I was prompted by the data to focus on the qualitative dimension of my experience rather than on methodological elements per se. So, for example, rather than using procedural

constructs such as phases of research activity or methodological issues to organize my analysis (as in Cole, 1989, 1991; Cole & Knowles, 1993), I highlight the affective aspects of my research experience. In so doing, I provide a perspective on research that is not often presented.

I illustrate and comment on my experiences of anxiety and uncertainty at various times during the study. I focus on my struggles over self-disclosure, my concern over the limitations of our attempts to re-present elements of my life and the importance of striving for accuracy in that re-presentation, and on how the research experience has influenced my thinking, actions, and professional practice in the time beyond the completion of the study.

Anxious Beginnings and Intrusions into Daily Life

> First meetings . . . set the tone for subsequent encounters. The purpose is to engage the interest and commitment of the participant and to initiate a collegial relationship. . . . The conditions of the research need to be negotiated and agreed upon in advance of any investigative work. (Cole, 1991, pp. 192-193)

This passage is taken from an article I wrote about life history research methods. Although in a practical sense I still believe it to be true, I am now very aware of the lack of attention I paid to the kind of emotional preparation that is also required.

Madeleine and I met prior to the formal beginning of our research to talk about how we wanted to work together and what we hoped to achieve, and to work out the details of our arrangement. We had the advantage of knowing one another prior to this research commitment, and we already had a collegial working relationship built on mutual trust and respect. There was no question about my being interested in and committed to our research project. After all, we were researching a life and it was mine! And, since I also had another agenda

centred on researching the process, one might say my interest was doubly vested. So, in theory, after our initial meeting, we were ready to proceed. I was not prepared, however, for the anxiety I experienced after that meeting and prior to our first interview.

The day before our first "formal" interview Madeleine called to confirm our plans. Hanging up the phone, after communicating my excitement about our project and my eagerness to begin, a wave of self-doubt overcame me and my head began to spin with questions. Will I be able to respond to the kinds of questions she is likely to ask? If so, how? What will I "look like" on tape and in print? What parts of me and my life will I and we reconstruct? Will I portray myself and be portrayed honestly? accurately? What does that mean anyway? All the rest of that day and night, thoughts and feelings about our upcoming interview did laps in my mind.

As a research participant, who also was a researcher, I felt that I had a definite advantage over other research participants. I thought I knew what to expect; however, my theoretical knowledge about life history and other forms of personal research provided little insight into the actual experience of preparing for the research. In addition, although the time we spent negotiating our research relationship at the outset and the mutual trust we had already established were invaluable, I was still not prepared for the multiple ways in which engaging in the research invaded my life. Preparing for the research entailed much more than negotiating some procedural and relational issues up front.

With this experience in mind, I think back to the numerous times I have initiated research relationships with participants. Did they experience the same kind of uncertainty and anxiety as I now did as a participant? Were my words of explanation and assurance adequate? Did I do all that I could to try and help

them understand and prepare for the research process? How did they feel about our relationship? Were they intimidated? What were their early concerns? Did they have concerns about the way in which they would be represented? To what extent did they have opportunities to express their concerns or anxieties?

Incompleteness of a Retold Life

Perhaps because of the personal nature of our inquiry, and perhaps because of its intense and continuing nature, the research became an intrusion in my day-to-day life. It was always there–sometimes at the forefront of my thinking, other times tucked away in a corner of my mind. I wondered and worried over my level of coherence in the interviews, about the "relevance" of my responses, about what exactly I had said and its "accuracy." I found little comfort in my theoretical knowledge and in echoes of my own words of reassurance to those whose lives I had researched. I shared some of these concerns with Madeleine as part of our reflection on the research process.

> Between the time we talked and the time I saw [the first transcript] in print, . . . (a period of two to three days) I was very, very aware of being the one researched. . . . [I experienced] a little bit of anxiety . . . and a lot of uncertainty. That uncertainty was played out very explicitly when I finally got the transcript. I, almost literally, rushed in [to my office] and closed the door. I was on my way to do something [else] and I could not help but stop [to look at the transcript]. I had spent a lot of time wondering what I would look like in print. I have had enough experience with interviewing and with analyzing transcribed tapes, et cetera, not to worry about how inarticulate everyone appears because that just happens [in oral speech]. I can look past that to some extent, but I was very aware and concerned about how what I said might come across, whether I was able to accurately articulate what I wanted to. (June 7, 1993)

The incompleteness of the picture of my life that we were reconstructing through the interview process plagued me. Numerous times in our conversations I, in retrospect, belaboured certain points in an effort to preclude an inaccurate or incomplete representation. Knowing in theory, and being repeatedly assured by Madeleine that we were "retelling parts of my life, not reliving it" were not enough to assuage my concerns.

Upon reading the transcripts I was reminded of the unidimensional, oversimplified nature of a retold life:

> As I read the interview transcript, [I experienced] a high level of awareness about how simplistically lives are presented [in the retelling]. That comes across again and again and again. It is important to always remind ourselves that, as you said earlier, [the retold story] is a sketch, . . . a frame. . . . Sometimes the whole picture becomes distorted. [For example], the [account] about my goals and achievements: as I read it, as I rendered it here, [that part of my life] seems so simplistic and not at all how [things really happened]. (July 6, 1993)

In a matter of only a few minutes of conversation, which translated into a couple of pages of transcribed text, I presented a synoptic account of the academic and career goals I had set throughout my life and how I had worked towards their achievement. In print, my career path–which in reality was circuitous and serendipitous characterized more by uncertainty and spontaneity than by calculated planning–appeared as a carefully mapped and direct route. My account of some of the critical incidents in my life appeared as a series of events, void of emotion, circumstance, and context–void of life. The life I lived and the story I told to represent elements of that life were quite disparate.

In partial response to the incompleteness of a retold life, we repeatedly acknowledged the importance of having sufficient time to reconstruct the life I was telling:

> That scenario I was playing out seemed, in the retelling, to be absolutely simplistic. By retelling it, I completely removed any of the richness and emotion that were lived. . . . In part this is a recognition that life is so complicated and it takes a long time to recapture other than bare, essential qualities. (June 7, 1993)

The following excerpt from a dialogue reveals more of my frustration and examples of Madeleine's reassurances about the incompleteness of my rendition.

> Ardra: I think that picture [in my account] of the person I was is incomplete in some significant ways, and so perhaps the portrait [I am rendering] is quite distorted.
>
> Madeleine: If we use the image of a portrait, [your story of your life] is [being] sketched in. It is very rough [at first] and details are added in layers and layers. You can change the portrait by the addition or elimination of certain areas.
>
> Ardra: That is a nice image. It does kind of capture what it is we are doing.
>
> Madeleine: [The image] changes. . . . When you start, there is not that [clear] conception of how it is going to end and, even in the creation, it changes.
>
> Ardra: Knowing that there is not the pressure to complete the portrait today, or to render a very finely detailed watercolour, really frees me up as a participant. (May, 27, 1993)

Life history studies usually involve a series of interviews that each typically lasts from one to two hours. During that time participants are asked what we

researchers call "open-ended" questions intended to elicit, in a free flowing conversational style, recollections and reconstructions of elements of the participant's life. The spontaneous, responsive nature of these kinds of interviews can be at once enabling and inhibiting for participants. From a participant's perspective it is much easier, in many ways, to respond to a survey-like, close-ended or bounded question than to the kinds of open-ended, limitless questions characteristic of life history interviews. For example, consider a question such as, "Can you take me back to your home town and tell me what it was like to grow up there?" While such a question is likely to engender rich, contextual information, it can also be overwhelming in its scope. Questions like this always left me thinking and wondering about my responses for days after the actual interview. I was acutely aware of how selective I was in my responses, and of how incoherent and incomplete they were despite my attempts to be thorough and accurate within the constraints of time and situation.

My own experience of being the researched makes me wonder now about those I have interviewed. I recall being repeatedly overwhelmed by the richness and eventfulness of the stories people told about their lives and, yet, I wonder now how satisfied <u>they</u> were with the life they orally reconstructed. Did they, too, worry over the representation of their stories in print? Beyond the inevitable self-criticism of the sometimes incoherent or unpolished nature of running speech when it appears in print, I cannot recall any research participant outwardly responding to <u>their</u> accounts the way I did. Why was that? Did they not feel sufficiently comfortable to do so? Did I not encourage them enough? Were they intimidated by the process?

<u>Acknowledging Authority Over the Story Line</u>

In the spirit of narrative research epistemology we assumed that, in the reconstruction of a life, everything is relevant. We were guided in our work by our

belief in the authority of the research participant in matters of disclosure and identification of story lines to pursue. While I valued my authority in these matters, believed that everything was indeed relevant, and that I was the editor of my own text, the open-ended nature of the life history interviews and my having control over my telling were points of tension for me. In spite of what I knew at a theoretical level, I worried about the relevance of my responses and their seemingly divergent nature. I shared my concern with Madeleine:

> [During the interview] I thought, "I am going off on a tangent here. What does this have to do with anything?," even when I know that it does. . . . The nature of this research is such that the participant–the researched–can get so lost or caught up in her own story that, if left on her own, she could go on forever and ever and ever. Because it is so self-absorbing, I think it is very easy to lose the focus of the research. I was getting caught up in [telling] my own story and with making sense of it.
>
> There is a tension between [allowing the conversation] to go off in a direction that, as you say, is important to go off in because there is a reason for the digression, and [identifying] the link between the digression and the purpose of the research. I wonder whether . . . the person being interviewed needs some reassurance that, indeed, this all does fit together and this all is related to the research topic. (July 6, 1993)

As a researcher, I believe that:

> The extent to which the researcher can know what information is essential and what lines of inquiry to pursue is debatable. . . . The informant must be given a certain degree of authority to determine the events to identify for discussion or further exploration. (Cole, 1991, p. 201-205)

From the perspective of the research participant, however, I was less comfortable with the decision-making role. At the same time, I valued feeling in control of my telling. In conversing with Madeleine I stated:

> I was very aware that you did not have a script or . . . a series of questions to cover, or that [the interview] wasn't just an oral survey kind of a thing. I think that told me a few things. One of the things it told me was that I was more in control of what was being said here and [that] it was my story that I was telling. I was not just responding [to a set of questions]. (May 27, 1993)

I vacillated in my response to being placed in control over the direction our conversations took. Although it was important for me to feel that I had a role in determining the line of inquiry, I was concerned about the relevance of what I was saying to the purpose of the research. I think back to the times when, as a researcher, I provided the same kind of encouragement to participants as Madeleine did to me. I wonder whether, in the process of telling their stories, the participants in those studies worried over the relevance of what they were saying in spite of my reassurances and (hopefully) obvious interest. Often, they punctuated their responses with uncertainties such as, "Are you sure this is what you want?" or "I'm not sure if this is the kind of answer you're looking for but . . . ." Then, I interpreted those kinds of queries as participants' attempts to please me, the researcher, and I typically tried to reassure them about there not being a "right" answer. Now, based on my own experience as a research participant, I wonder whether their questions were indications of a level of discomfort with the decision-making role that I was encouraging them to assume.

Given the traditionally passive nature of the participant's role in research, how do we help participants to feel comfortable assuming more active roles in the design and conduct of inquiry? How do we communicate the value of their input?

How do we help participants to be more willing to contribute to the interpretation and re-presentation of their lives?

Self-disclosure and Exposure

As a researcher I place ethical issues at the forefront of my research agenda, and as a teacher of qualitative research methods and a thesis supervisor, I encourage graduate student researchers to do the same. In a recent article I commented on the importance of attention to ethical issues in personal research:

> Ethical issues infuse [life history] research projects at every point of their implementation. . . . With the advent of more intrusive research methods and the requirements of personal investment in research, consideration of ethical issues takes on a new prominence. . . . [Researchers need to attend to issues such as:] confidentiality, . . . consent, . . . access to data during and after study, . . . negotiation of control, . . . and equity of influence. (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 489-490)

My experience as a research participant gave me pause to reflect anew on some of these issues.

At a couple of points in our interviews I made brief references to matters that I did not wish to further pursue in our discussions either because they were too painful, or because I felt that I could not adequately explain them in the context of the research, or because I simply did not want to go public with the information. As always, I was reminded of my authority over the text and that I was the editor of my own public story. These instances gave me pause to reflect both from the perspective of the researched and the researcher.

> As a researcher, one needs to stand or sit back, assess the situation, and make some decisions . . . about how far to push [the participant to provide] the kind of information that is really going to inform the research. . . . There is, on the one hand, the need to respect the individual and to be

> sensitive to the individual's behaviour in relation to self-disclosure. And [there is the need to] allow time [for the] relationship to [form] and trust [to develop] so that, over time, perhaps more self disclosure will take place. But [on the other hand], the researcher has to ask the question, "If that [self-disclosure] is not going to happen to my satisfaction as a researcher, how do I respond? Am I really getting information that is going to help me address the research question or area of focus sufficiently well?" (July 6, 1993)

There is no easy resolution to this dilemma; however, my experience of being researched has led me to underscore the importance of sensitivity and respect in matters of self-disclosure. It was important for me to be reminded of my authority over the text, that I held the power to decide what I would disclose. I was made to feel comfortable with that power and with the decisions I made. Now, more than ever, I am convinced that researchers must maintain high levels of ethical and moral responsibility toward those they engage in personal research. Although I believe that we are all editors of our own text, and that we do make choices about self-disclosure, I wonder how research participants <u>feel</u> about the choices they make. How do they resolve any dissonance possibly experienced in the process of making decisions about what they reveal of themselves? How do we, as researchers, participate in that resolution process?

Because of the personal nature of the research and the content of the interviews, I was mindful of potential political implications of my involvement in the research. I, therefore, took particular care with the raw data (the audio-tapes and transcripts) to protect my anonymity and confidentiality in my own workplace. Although I had complete trust in Madeleine, she was unable to transcribe our interviews so, unlike most research participants, I was able to make arrangements for the transcribing to be done. I was satisfied that the

personal data from our interviews was safe with the person with whom I had entrusted them until, somehow, one of the tapes and a hard copy of a tape transcript went missing from her desk. Hours of searching and retracing actions proved fruitless. I was (and am) left to wonder what had happened and why. Subsequently, I wondered aloud to Madeleine about how careful researchers really are about protecting the confidentiality of their participants when engaging the services of others. Aside from assigning pseudonyms to the data, What efforts are typically taken when entrusting personal information to others? And, beyond any information given on informed consent forms, How much do participants know about what happens to the data during and after the study? I also wonder how comfortable participants typically feel about asking researchers for details about the security and use of the data.

Accepting Authority Over the Text

Participant access to interview transcripts throughout a life history study is important for several methodological reasons:

> The life history interview is the forum where much of the interpretation takes place. Here points are clarified, statements verified, and information from previous interviews and from supplementary sources validated. The participant, then, must have access to the information throughout the conduct of the inquiry (Cole, 1991, p. 203).
>
> The cyclical feeding back of interpretation in life history research enables the story teller to give more thorough consideration to initial statements, impressions, comments, and reflections. (Cole, 1991, p. 191)

The importance of my having access to the interview transcripts, and opportunities to elaborate points or clarify inaccuracies in interpretation, was repeatedly evidenced in our study. In some cases, after reading a transcript of an interview, I was dissatisfied with the way in which I had responded to a question

or had portrayed a person or event. In those cases, it was important for me to be able to clarify and/or elaborate. For example, in one interview I described some of the values I thought I had learned as a child. In response, I spoke about some of what I perceive to be my mother's values and how I responded to them as a young person. The result, in the transcript, was a distorted image of my mother and an inaccurate representation of my formative values. In a subsequent interview I was able to correct the misrepresentations and more directly respond to the question.

In other cases, I was able to address inaccuracies in interpretation. For example, the following brief exchange set the scene for further clarifications at a later time.

> Ardra: [During my summers in the country] I spent most of my time on the beach, playing in the sand and walking on the rocks. One of my mother's friends there had a son who was in a wheelchair and he liked to play games, so I played games with him. . . .
>
> Madeleine: So even when you were on holiday, you had this nurturing role, looking after someone. (May 27, 1993)

Later, in one of our discussions after I had read the transcript, I picked up on this interchange.

> Ardra: We talked about when I was a child, the summers we spent on the seashore, and you asked me what I did there and so on. I mentioned my mother's friend ['s son] who was in a wheelchair and your response was an interesting one.
>
> Madeleine: I used the word "nurturing."
>
> Ardra: Yes, you said, "So even when you are on holiday, you had this nurturing role, looking after someone." My response to that [upon reading the transcript] was "No, absolutely not. I never felt nurturing in any way."

> . . . The point of clarification, I think, is that this person [in the wheelchair] was an adult, not a little boy. . . . I did not explain that. It was not a nurturing kind of thing. . . . You mention [nurturing] later on, too, and I had the same response.

At another point in the same discussion I referred to another segment of the previous interview:

> Madeleine: I get a strong sense of who you were as a child. It is very much the kind of person you are today. I don't know how you were in the mid-part of [your life] but, as a child, duty was really ingrained into you–this feeling of responsibility and all of this nurturing–all of the characteristics of a good teacher. You are saying "I always wanted to be a teacher." It was self-fulfilling.
>
> Ardra: Here is this nurturing business again.
>
> Madeleine: I am confusing responsibility and nurturing.
>
> Ardra: I think it is just a different use of words but . . . , still, I do not characterize myself in any way as a nurturing [person] . . . and I do not see teaching as a nurturing kind of profession.

There were also several other instances where I had, and took advantage of, the opportunity to negotiate the interpretation of the life–mine–that we were reconstructing.

From a researcher's standpoint, I believe that sharing the responsibility for interpretation is important for the validity and integrity of the life history account. From the perspective of a participant, however, I was more concerned with my own peace of mind. After I read each transcript, it was essential for me to be able to respond to perceived inaccuracies and misrepresentations that became apparent. And I did. I took seriously my authority over the text, striving to have aspects of my life represented as accurately as possible.

When I think back to the numerous times I have provided research participants opportunities to clarify inaccuracies and misinterpretations I might have made during our conversations, I am puzzled by their general acceptance of the portrayals. Seldom do participants take issue with or attempt to clarify points or passages. Is this because they are completely satisfied with their re-presentations or are they perhaps intimidated by the suggestion? Perhaps they are uncertain about how to proceed. In any case, how do we appropriately encourage research participants to exercise their rightful authority over the text?

Researching and Re-Searching

Life history (and other forms of personal) research demands that stories and chapters of a life be reopened, re-examined, and retold. In the process of reconstructing aspects of my life, in an attempt to make meaning of those experiences and their relation to my professional practice, I experienced moments of revelation, confusion, sorrow, and joy. Awarenesses and questions emerged, dilemmas and contradictions presented themselves, and unresolved issues reappeared. Consequently, the research activity extended the boundaries of our original research agreement and became personal in another way–it became part of my own quest for personal-professional understanding. The unanswered questions, the unresolved contradictions, and the dangling threads of conversation impelled me to know more, to broaden and deepen insights gained and meaning made through my work with Madeleine. Thus, despite the research with Madeleine being formally concluded, my personal journey continues. As I revisit those segments of my life that did not appear as public text, and strive to make stronger connections between who I was, am, and may be, I do so alone. The re-search is personal and private. How then, as a research participant and researcher of the self and the personal, do I respond to my own words originally written over four years ago:

> In life history research, participants are encouraged to recall and [perhaps] confront past events, events that may not always be pleasing to remember. . . . Prior to engaging the participant, the researcher needs to consider the potential impact or consequences of the research on the participant and be prepared to see him or her through any unforeseen difficulties. (Cole, 1991, p. 193)

Because of the nature of our inquiry–life history–I knew, at the outset, that I would be replaying scenes from my distant and recent past as well as adding script to both past and current actions and events. I was aware of the critical incidents and influences in my life that I would be revisiting, and I knew, more or less, what I was prepared to talk about and what I was not. What kind of support, then, was reasonable to expect from Madeleine? She took the time and care, before we started, to describe in detail what the research entailed, and she communicated her sensitivity and responsiveness throughout the research process. I felt supported while engaged in the research we undertook together. I could not have expected any more. Her obligations to me do not extend to any personal inquiry I choose to engage in as a spin-off from our work.

My experience as a research participant leads me to ask: What <u>is</u> the responsibility of the researcher? What are the expectations and boundaries of the research relationship? While I abide by my moral and ethical commitment to support research participants throughout the research process, it may not always be possible to anticipate how engaging in an inquiry might influence a participant. In some cases, participants may not overtly express their responses to issues and difficulties that may arise during the resarch. They may choose instead to deal privately with any troubling or unresolved matters. In cases like these (which I expect are fairly typical), the researcher may be unaware of the

participant's "private story." In such instances, what kind of support is it reasonable to expect of a researcher?

There are cases in which the subject matter of the research is particularly sensitive (e.g., Carlin's (1994) study of women who left abusive relationships, or Trapedo-Dworsky's (1994) study of women's sexuality at menopause. See, also, Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Sears, 1992), thus increasing the likelihood of support needs throughout the research and perhaps beyond. In studies like these, where the psychological risk is obvious from the outset, researchers must take special care to provide necessary support. For the most part, though, perhaps the most important thing a researcher can do to prepare participants for engaging in personal research is provide sufficient information about the research process, at the outset and throughout the inquiry, that will enable participants to make informed decisions about their participation. This, of course, assumes that participants are engaged in the research as active associates not passive subjects, and that the research is undertaken as a negotiated enterprise.

Reflexivity in Research

The term, "reflexivity," as Hunt (1987) and others have used it, means being self-reflexive, or reflecting ideas and experiences back on oneself–an explicit bringing out of one's own understandings based on one's own experiences. Being reflexive in research, in Hunt's terms, means "beginning with yourself" as a research participant in order to: define an inquiry; make explicit your assumptions; and, raise awareness about how participants might feel in order to be responsive to them throughout the research. In this paper I have adopted a self-reflexive stance with a primary focus on the latter intention.

The relatively recent paradigm shift to interpretive–critical, and post-structural–forms of qualitative research, particularly those conducted from a feminist perspective, has placed a new level of importance on the research

process and, among other things, has highlighted the researcher-participant relationship. There is a rapidly growing body of literature on qualitative research methods in which researchers address issues of reflexivity and subjectivity (e.g., Dawe, 1973; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Heshusius, 1992; Olesen, 1994), ethical issues–particularly those associated with research of a highly personal or sensitive nature (e.g., Renzetti & Lee, 1993; Sears, 1992); political issues such as representation and voice (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Noffke, 1991; McLaughlin & Tierney, 1994); and, there is work that focuses on the research relationship (e.g., Cole, 1991; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Glesne, 1983). All of this work has either a primary or secondary purpose related to articulating researchers' moral responsibilities to research participants, and to increasing their sensitivity to participants engaged in research that is personal in nature. The work represented in this paper is another such attempt.

By placing myself in the position of "the other"–the research participant–I have come to a more meaningful understanding about what it means to be the researched. In so doing, I believe I have developed a deeper, more sensitive awareness of my roles and responsibilities as a researcher and teacher of qualitative research methods. By engaging in research as a participant, I have acquired an experiential understanding that has added a critical dimension to my knowledge and practice of qualitative research, particularly life history research. In addition to feeling more confident about my own research practice, I also feel better prepared to guide graduate student researchers in conceptualizing and designing sensitive and ethically responsible inquiries. And, from a pedagogical perspective, placing myself in a position of the other has added a level of authenticity to my teaching. By drawing on both theoretical and experiential knowledge of qualitative research methods from the perspective of the researcher

and the researched I am able to practice what I preach about the need for reflexivity in research.

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